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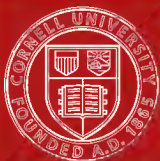


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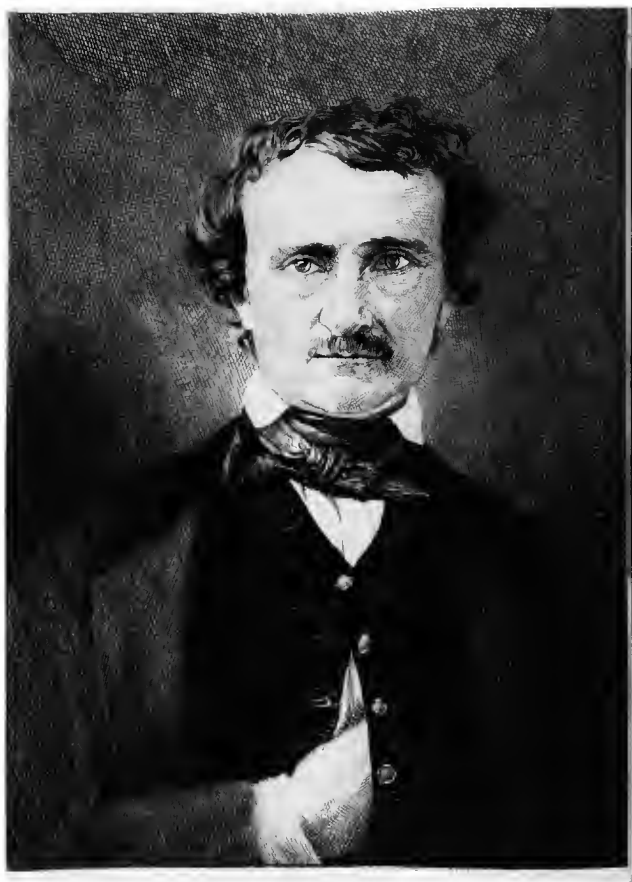




**EDGAR ALLAN POE**  
**HIS GENIUS AND CHARACTER**













# EDGAR ALLAN POE

## HIS GENIUS AND CHARACTER

BY

JOHN M. DILLON

Author of "Motor Days in England," Editor "Marshall's  
Constitutional Decisions," etc.

*"To understand is more difficult than to judge, for understanding is the transference of the mind into the condition of the object, whereas judgment is simply the enunciation of the individual opinion."*—Amiel.

The Knickerbocker Press

NEW YORK AND LONDON

1911



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The Knickerbocker Press, New York



To  
GEORGE DUNLOP RUSSELL

July 21st, 1910

. . . " Another if I would I could not find,  
And I am grown much older in a day." . . .  
*George Santayana.*



## PREFACE

**W**ITHIN a year I formed one of a numerous company composed largely of men more or less known in the world of letters. The meeting was unpremeditated and entirely social. During the evening the name of Edgar Allan Poe was mentioned. The opinions which followed concerning Poe's standing in our literature and the permanent value of his work were so varied as to be remarkable and especially noticeable in a company, the greater number of whom were writers by profession.

I was strongly impressed, and I must say somewhat surprised and disappointed, by the fact that it seemed hard to exclude Poe's private life and character from a discussion of his genius. In one way or another, references to his habits, weaknesses, and tragic death would creep in. The injustice of this illogical reasoning would probably have been palpable to these men had the quality of Byron's work or that of Rousseau been under discussion, but with unfortunate Poe everything seemed fair. It would be hard, I think, to select another man of Poe's literary eminence and still find so wide a difference in the opinions of men trained in the technicalities of

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letters and it would be equally hard to find another to whom justice would not be granted.

Poe has been particularly unfortunate. The evils which tormented him throughout his life did not die with him, they still haunt his memory; to this day they distill their noxious influences into the general estimate of Poe and his work. Poe's name has recently been added to those in the New York Hall of Fame, yet it required many years to gain the necessary votes to place it there.

It is an old Spanish proverb, I believe, which says that one drop of gall pollutes a million times its bulk of pure water, and one cannot but feel that the acridity in

Griswold's "Memoir" has so permeated the reading world that even now, after the lapse of half a century, a good deal of the obloquy associated with Poe's memory and much of the sophistical disparagement of his genius may be traced to his first biographer.

Horace wisely observed that the cask will long retain the flavor of that liquid with which it was first filled and, indeed, it is no simple task quickly to reverse the judgment of a well-known contemporary, especially when that judgment has been disseminated by the powerful medium of the pen.

I have told of this meeting at a somewhat tedious length only



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because the following sketch is the direct outcome of that evening's discussion. What I have written, it may be superfluous to add, does not assume to be a critical literary essay in any sense. It is simply an outline of some of the events which played so conspicuous a part in an unhappy life, and it is an appreciation, meagre as it is, of the extraordinary talents of a singular and wretched man.

Among other things in this sketch I have, in a brief manner, attempted to show that many of Poe's unfortunate tendencies which ultimately grew into those lamentable vices so conspicuous in his later life and which are so uniformly associated

with his memory might possibly have been averted had his early years been spent amidst more congenial and loving environments. His orphaned boyhood was a wandering and unhappy one. At the time his character was in that plastic state so easily moulded into proper form by affectionate and tactful guidance, he was under the care of a schoolmaster in a foreign land where he remained from the age of six years until his twelfth year. His temperament—proud, egoistic, impulsive—was peculiarly sensitive to extraneous influences, responding to the slightest impulse,—as quickly to evil as to good. Those years passed amidst strange, deadening, and unsympa-

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thetic surroundings—Poe too proud and diffident to seek affection or companionship, his schoolmaster too indifferent or too much occupied to bestow it—probably fostered an innate tendency to gloom and despair and undoubtedly had a direct effect upon Poe's mature character. I have also tried to point out that the equally unfortunate influences surrounding Poe's adolescence probably aided to no small extent in developing into vices the propensities which at that time were yet in an incipient stage. I have sought, in justice to Poe, for such causes as I could find to explain if possible the inception of those traits of character which have militated against Poe and his

genius. If I shall succeed, even in some slight degree, in laying before the reader any extenuating circumstances when judging Poe, and have presented his case from a more charitable point of view, and finally if from my writing may be gleaned anything which may to some extent sweeten Poe's memory I shall be paid in full for my effort.

I need hardly say that I am indebted to Professor Woodberry for the majority of my facts concerning Poe; any one who now writes about Poe cannot be otherwise. It would seem appropriate to insert here a tribute, inadequate as it may be, to Professor Woodberry for his scholarly and comprehensive "Life of Edgar Allan Poe."

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As I turn the last page of his biography and meditate upon what he has told me, the book seems to possess one dominant tone—it leaves a definite feeling of justice done, a careful and exhaustive judicial scrutiny of the facts and an unbiased charge to the jury to weigh with scrupulous care the evidence before returning a verdict for or against Poe. Professor Woodberry has been studiously alert in avoiding many of the pitfalls into which other biographers have fallen, probably the most treacherous of which is allowing a personal enthusiasm and admiration to so disturb the judgment that the reader receives the testimony of the writer with a certain hesitancy.

If, indeed, Professor Woodberry's opinion of Poe's work, even where that work is most distinguished, is remarkable more for careful and just moderation than for fervor, yet it always bears with it a conviction of sincerity and honesty and is received with the deference which is due to such opinions. Praise is bestowed graciously when Professor Woodberry believes it is merited, and it is given with a composure and dignity pleasing at all times, but admirable in a book of this character.

Looking at a list of our eminent men of letters, it is difficult to select a man quite so urgently in need of an intelligent, diligent, and unbiased biographer as Poe. And looking

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still more closely, the retrospection forces upon one the conviction that it would be difficult to find another in which the path of the biographer is strewn with so many and such varied obstacles.

All men, therefore, and especially the admirers of Poe are under a lasting debt of gratitude to Professor Woodberry for his scholarly research, untiring diligence, and impartial sifting of the wheat from the chaff, and as I close the book I feel that the author has approached very near to the ideal biographer, whom he describes in his preface as being perfect in good sense, good will, and discretion.

My sincere thanks are due Mr.

C. F. W. Mielatz for his courtesy in permitting the use of his charming and poetic etching of the Fordham Cottage.

J. M. D.

"Overleigh,"

Far Hills, N. J., 1911.



# Edgar Allan Poe

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## CHAPTER I

The jury which sits in judgment upon a poet must be composed of his peers; it must be empanelled by time from the selectest of the wise of many generations.

SHELLEY.

OUT of the dim haze of years there rises in our literature a unique form that growing larger and more clearly defined as generations pass has now become to many of us the most attractive of the phantasms that surround it. It

is that of Poe. Not his extraordinary talents alone lend this fascination, for there are others amidst that shadowy throng whose genius is on a higher plane and of broader scope; it is more particularly the trials, griefs, and tragedies of his life which attract us, for sorrow is a magnet of great and lasting power.

The appearance of this form brings with it a recollection of a pleasing personality as well as a series of pathetic scenes. The pale boyish face, the luminous gray eyes, the broad intellectual brow, all tinged with an ineffable melancholy, come vividly to mind. We may trace on those lineaments the hyper-sensitive temperament, the innate tendency

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toward mystery and gloom. The wilful, restless spirit, the great weaknesses of character have also left their imprint. Adolescence follows: wayward, proud, gifted, egoistic, and misunderstood; and, later, we note the increase of morbid characteristics, the habit of dipsomania developing and with its growth the decay of physical vigor. We recall with regret the spells of madness and despair, we linger with pleasure over the moments of tenderness and love; the gentle and refined personality and the soft persuasive voice. We remember with compassion the young wife wasted by an insidious disease, the haunting poverty, the blighted hopes: the masterpieces

given to the world for a price hardly sufficient for daily wants: we are conscious at all times of the benign influence of the sweet, patient, ministering angel—Mrs. Clemm. Baltimore, Richmond, Philadelphia, New York, pass before our mental vision, each holding for Poe its sorrows, disappointments, and despair. The cottage at Fordham now appears in view, where the spirit of gentle Virginia tranquilly crossed the border; we see too the little garden there where Poe walked with his “more than mother,” their arms entwined. Above all else we shrink from a hideous spectre that casts its baleful influence over this wretched man. It follows with stealthy and

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persistent steps, inexorable, malignant, insatiate, blasting all happiness, banishing all hope, crushing him with humiliation, poverty, and disgrace, finally enveloping him in its vile embrace and overwhelming him with despair and—death.

To claim that Poe is a great poet in the sense that Wordsworth, Shelley, or Swinburne are great would be an absurdity; to assert that Poe's genius is unique, that he occupies a distinguished place within that circle in which the sensuous beauty of words, their euphonious arrangement and treatment are preëminently dominant, is a statement as true as the other claim would be absurd. Poe's

standing in the world of letters both as a prose writer and as a poet is quite as singular as the character of the man himself. He has no prototype in literature; he has none among men. As a craftsman of remarkable skill, as a metrical artist of exquisite refinement and invention, he bestowed upon American literature certain delicately wrought and highly finished productions, seldom, if ever, equalled and never excelled. One wanders luxuriously, to use a happy expression of Walter Pater's, in a garden of words. Beyond these confines one may not go. The most ardent admirer of Poe cannot justly claim for him great sublimity of thought or a wide range of sustained

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imaginative genius. Poe's scope is limited. Take from his poetical productions some half dozen poems and little of distinguished merit remains. Poe has sowed broadcast many seeds. A large proportion of these have died from lack of health and vitality but those which germinated have grown and still grow stronger and sturdier with the years and their roots have struck deep into the soil of our literature.

The poetry of Poe cannot properly be classed in any distinct school. There are in his poems traces reminiscent of Byron, Keats, Blake, and others; but their works are not in any sense the prototypes of his poetry for he created a verse

essentially his own. In a limited way he has done for America what Pope did for England. Pope introduced a verse that was in admirable keeping with the character of his poetry: highly artificial and polished, brilliant, witty, and satirical. Poe was the originator of lines essentially artistic, inventive, tuneful, and weird. He gave to American literature new cadences, haunting melodies and artistic forms—the very mould of his unique invention and strange imaginings. He blazed a path through the old forest of conventional metre, and chiefly by that act, a daring one in his day, he has left a firmer and more indelible imprint



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upon the poetry of this country than any other man with the possible exception of Walt Whitman.

Critics well qualified to judge have said that Poe gained many of his thoughts from other men. This criticism is no doubt true, but was it not Dean Swift who said that lighting our candle in a neighbor's fire does not diminish our property in the wick and flame?

James Russell Lowell, writing of the poet Gray, has admirably expressed a thought which applies so well to Poe that I quote from his essay somewhat at length: "In spite of unjust depreciation and misapplied criticism, Gray holds his own and bids fair to last as long as the language which

he knew how to write so well. . . . Wordsworth is justified in saying that Gray helped himself from everybody and everywhere—and yet he made such admirable use of what he stole (if theft there was) that we should as soon think of finding fault with a man for pillaging the dictionary. He mixed himself with whatever he took—an incalculable increment. But the thing to be considered is that, no matter where the material came from, the result is Gray's own. . . . The owners of what Gray 'conveyed' would have found it hard to identify their property and prove title to it after it had once suffered the Gray-change by steeping in his mind and memory."

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The nearer Poe approaches to the thoughts which one feels are the thoughts of others, the more manifest becomes the unique and peculiar quality of his intellect, and the comparison generally forces upon one the conviction that what Poe borrowed he returned with usurious interest. When the charge is made that Poe's works are obvious imitations of the styles and conceptions of others one feels that it is brought against the man of all others who should be free from such a criticism. It could even be said with more justice of greater men who have a surer foothold on immortality than he. If Poe is anything, one must grant him originality and invention.

Most of the earlier productions of Poe lie far beneath that elevated plane that "The Raven" and certain others of his poems occupy, yet they all possess, in varying degrees, the art and technical finish which is so characteristic of his work. The poems of his boyhood should be judged solely in the light of an exceptional precocity. There should be excepted from these, however, the beautiful lyric "To Helen," which is equal, if not superior, to anything in its kind produced by Poe in maturer years. One must acknowledge, nevertheless, that had Poe died in his youth his fame would have shed but the light of the stars on the world of letters. With "The Raven," "The

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Haunted Palace," "Ulalume," "The Bells," and "Annabel Lee," however, came the early, welcome light of day,—the *Eôthen* of purely artistic poetry in America.

Poetry is defined by Poe as "a rhythmical creation of beauty," and he maintained a vigorous struggle throughout his life to sustain this principle. Beauty is paramount in all his themes and for the highest manifestation of that beauty, the *tone*, he selected melancholy and claimed for it the most legitimate of poetic ideals. The death of a beautiful woman and the inconsolable grief occasioned in consequence is, therefore, a theme that like a filament winds itself into many of his poetic

conceptions. The thread is shuttled with regular and unceasing persistence until the fabric is complete, until the very warp and woof of Poe's mind is woven into it. Against the false theory of use, "the didactic heresy," he uttered his denunciation and hurled his philippics. It was probably Schlegel from whom he borrowed and put into practice the idea that a poem should be brief. And in this he seems to have followed also that counsel of Baltasar Gracian which says that good work is twice good if it is short. Poe contended that the phrase "a long poem" is simply a flat contradiction in terms; that these so-called "long poems" are but a series of short ones

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with inevitable platitudes connecting them; an alternation of excitement and depression. One wonders sometimes if Poe was conscious of his own limitations when he made these claims. How far his appeal for brevity can be carried and sustained may be left for far abler critics to expound. When urged against the great epics of literature it is too idle to consider seriously.

One is often at a loss to understand the difference of opinion among literary men concerning the merit of certain of Poe's poems. One may venture to observe that within its limits there is nothing finer in the language than the lyric beginning: "Helen, thy beauty is to

me." The dignity, beauty, and choice diction in the last two verses of the second stanza are especially noble:

"To the glory that was Greece  
And the grandeur that was Rome."

It is hard to conceive any other combination of words so loftily expressing the thought which these lines complete. In "The Bells" Poe has produced a highly artistic work and a striking example of onomatopœia. From a language formed rather for strength than for delicacy, he extracted a strain of sounds as soft, harmonious, and limpid as the murmuring of a woodland rivulet. The poem is com-



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plete in detail and masterly in execution, yet it leaves no lasting memories. The ideas brought to mind are of no importance. It is the mellifluous rhythm alone that for the moment lingers so sweetly in one's ears. There is present none of the attributes of a great poem that thrills the reader with a volume of organ-like melody. "The Bells" must rest its fame and popularity solely upon its delightful rhythmic quality and its poetic treatment. In these respects it has few rivals, even Southey's celebrated poem "The Cataract at Lodore" is hardly comparable.

In "The Haunted Palace" and in certain stanzas of "Israfel" and

"To Zante" Poe's rapture, although not long sustained, rises to the loftiest heights of poetic inspiration. One may claim for Poe but a tithe of the sustained sublimity, scope, and imaginative power of Swinburne, yet the lyrics of that master hardly surpass portions of these poems in exquisite rhythm and beauty.

Concerning "Ulalume" one speaks with some indecision. The poetic construction is true, the choice of diction powerful, convincing, and sincere, the artistic and technical finish indisputable. Still the poem drags, the lines move heavily and wearily with almost the sluggishness of an Alexandrine. "Ulalume" is,

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perhaps, even more profoundly melancholy than some of Poe's other poems, yet it is not the melancholy one feels so much as the overpowering sense of burden under which one labors. Thoreau tells of a man lost in the woods and dying of hunger and exhaustion at the foot of a tree. While in this desperate state his wretchedness is relieved by the grotesque visions with which, owing to bodily weakness, his diseased imagination surrounds him, and which he believes to be real. In this poem of "the ghoulishaunted woodland of Weir," Poe seems to have fallen into the plight of Thoreau's traveller. "Ulalume" was written at a time in Poe's life when he was in a state of

extreme physical exhaustion and the verses show it clearly.

In the "Philosophy of Composition" Poe goes at length into the *modus operandi* by which "The Raven" was evolved. One does not care to think of that elegant piece of pen-painting as being "worked up" as it were, in so calculating a way. It is necessarily conceded that so finished a work of artistic evolution is the result of much study and careful consideration, but the dissection of the entire poem and the minute scrutiny of its fragments one cannot contemplate with any pleasurable sensations. In my humble opinion if there ever was a finished piece of artistic work whose

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inception arose from pure inspiration, spontaneous, fresh, and brilliant, it is "The Raven." The thoughts leading to the subtle connotation in the verses:

"Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the  
bleak December,  
And each separate dying ember wrought  
its ghost upon the floor,"

I feel welled as pure from Poe's mind as ever words sprang from the bards of Israel. It has been said that the dominating thought in "The Raven" is remorse. Poe's wife had suffered several alarming and admonitory illnesses and his hyper-sensitive nature endured intense anguish during these attacks. May it not be possible that he

foresaw his wife's impending death with that subtle prescience which occasionally forms so intimate a bond of sympathy between affinities? Powerless to avert the doom which awaited her, the poignancy of Poe's grief overwhelmed him with despair. Although his conduct toward his wife was ever that of gentleness and love, yet those lapses in behavior when he abandoned himself to prolonged intoxication naturally caused her great sorrow and anxiety. It was remorse at the recollection of her sorrow that has been set forth as being the theme running throughout the stanzas of the poem.

Poe's poetic conceptions generally

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rose clearly defined. He day-dreamed, and under the influence of his eccentric genius his visions assumed to him actual forms and these he imbued with all the mysticism of his nature. He closed his eyes and instantly phantasmagoria came unbidden to his presence. From this incoherent gathering he selected the shapes suited to his purpose, perfected them, and moulded them to his will. The inventive power of his mind is remarkable, the vigor of his intellect is ever-present. Sentence follows sentence, phrase succeeds phrase, teeming with his unique personality and arranged with the unerring sense for symphonic effect that made him a master-

builder of exquisite and tuneful rhythm.

Numerous critics have attacked Poe's poems with asperity and in many cases prompted solely by animus. His verses were hacked and pulled apart by men, most of whom are quite forgotten. This mutilation caused his works no lasting injury, they seem to possess certain miraculous qualities akin to those of the heroes of Walhalla who, being cut to pieces before noon, sat down to dinner unhurt.

It would be idle to deny that in certain of Poe's poems the obscurity is so pronounced as to render them almost meaningless. In "Al Aaraaf," "Israfel," and "Ulalume" it is diffi-



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cult to comprehend the exact meaning. This obscurity seems to be partly the result of an exquisite subtlety of distinction and the mystic mould of Poe's singular intellect. Apart from his well-known tendency to mystery it was his expressed purpose to veil his thoughts in obscurity, for he believed the mystification of the reader to be a necessary adjunct to interest. De Quincey, who had one of the most subtle, extensive, and analytical minds of his time, said that he could not live without mystery. With him that trait was largely engendered by the habits of solitude and his addiction to drugs; with Poe it does not seem to have primarily arisen from any mode

of living, it was apparently to some extent at least innate; forming a part of his very existence and inextricably woven into his being.

Poe, having once recited some of his poems to a certain group of young ladies, said he feared portions of "Ulalume" might not be intelligible to them as they were hardly clear to himself. This remark might illustrate a similar one made by a well-known poet that when he "wrote very fine, he did not always expect to understand himself." Why then should the reader be disappointed because he cannot understand all of Poe's meaning?—rather let him try to comprehend such portions as he can and be content with

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the influence of the melodious words. One recalls a parable of the most pessimistic of German philosophers which in a measure is in point: Two Chinamen travelling in Europe went to the theatre for the first time. One of them did nothing but study the machinery and finally succeeded in finding out how it worked; the other tried to get at the entire meaning of the piece, in spite of his ignorance of the language, and understood nothing. A comparison of Poe's more obscure poems with the standards of purely descriptive or didactic poetry will show them to be impenetrable and with hardly a glimmer of light; but if his nature is taken as the master-key, the man and

his work studied together, Maya will perhaps bestow that inspiration which gives an inner sense to the outward word.

Walt Whitman said he did not fear the charge of obscurity being brought against his poems "because human thought, poetry or melody must have dim escapes and outlets,—must possess a certain fluid, aërial character, akin to space itself, obscure to those of little or no imagination but indispensable to the highest purposes." In this statement may be found a simple yet convincing justification for that indefinable quality so often found in the highest thoughts, a quality which defies explanation and is ever elusive of

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solution. It is generally conceded that since Milton's "Samson Agonistes" was written, no more beautiful poem based on a Greek model has been given to the world than the "Atalanta in Calydon" of Swinburne. Yet in it are many passages in which the almost unparalleled richness and delicacy of the poet's thoughts lie far beneath the surface, so far, indeed, that the reader imperfectly comprehends or appreciates them and must be content to catch, occasionally, a beautiful and translucent beam from the depths.

Poe's dominating fondness of euphony is probably accountable for a certain amount of the obscurity in his work. To express oneself with

clearness without striving for a euphonious effect is not always a simple matter; to unite perspicuity with euphony and attempt to convey clearly not only one's ideas but at the same time to please the ear is a much more difficult task and one in which thoughts are often sacrificed to sound.

It is not always advantageous to denude the beautiful form of the alluring draperies enfolding it and which by revealing portions only of the exquisite modelling lend scope and stimulus to the imagination. Have we ever quite forgiven Euhemerus, that old Sicilian Greek, who wrote an explanatory sacred history and spoiled the myths

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of Greece and Rome? The things we are easily able to understand are not those that usually endure. It may be said that it is subtle obscurity, veiled beauty, and mystery, ever calling for solution, that win immortality. It is the mysterious, the elusive, the unattainable in the works of both God and man that have proved the cherished goal of thought, sought for with undiminished ardor for ages past and which will be wooed through the eternal years. And so it is with those sublime books in which occasional glimpses of God's infinite goodness and omniscience are made manifest through the medium of inspiration in man, for they too are

great *pharos* erected on the shore of thought. Shining with steady and eternal light, they safely guide us; by their glow we may fearlessly set our compass and steer our course through the hazardous voyage of life until, at last, in the evening of our years we peacefully rest within a serene and sheltered harbor.

It has often been said that if Poe's poems were less lugubrious they would be more welcome. Had Poe changed the character of his conceptions his inspiration would have vanished. One can hardly imagine him writing with the placid cheerfulness of Lamb, and had he made the attempt "The Raven" would not have tapped at his door



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that evening in December. Poe could not adapt his thoughts to fit the Procrustean bed of popular fancy. It is fortunate that genius cannot do so if it would. One shudders at the thought of Milton attempting to gratify the prevailing taste under Charles II.—a taste which preferred Wycherly to Shakespeare and Rochester to Spenser.

## CHAPTER II

What a garden of words.

WALTER PATER.

THE prose style of Poe needs no lengthy praise. Brilliant and concise, it has few superfluous words, and little decoration for decoration's sake. It has been called cold and hard but never verbose. There is a fine balance and direction in his best compositions; no breaking up of unimportant lights to distract the attention; no diverging lines to entice away. Every part of it shows a

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perfect accord and harmony, each successive step leads unerringly to a climax. It possesses unity and artistic conception as complete as an etching by Whistler. There is nothing superficial in his style. One may object to the subject and the school with good reason; one never could assert with justice that it is a sham. The most "hideous human face" says Schopenhauer, "is better than a mask." Poe in the unity and precision of his style resembles a skilled duellist handling his rapier in deadly combat, hand, eye, and brain working in perfect order and time. Each sentence is as clearly cut as if engraved in steel. The style is Poe, the man himself,

his flesh and blood, recalling to mind what Emerson said of Montaigne: "Cut his sentences and they bleed." That his style is open to criticism from a technical point of view, is true, yet one can hardly imagine how the alteration of a single word, the transposition or reconstruction of a single paragraph, phrase, or sentence in "The Fall of the House of Usher" could improve it: one can very easily understand how the slightest change would ruin it.

Many have unsuccessfully attempted to imitate Poe's style. Flavor is lacking, as well as judgment and literary skill, and above all else the art is not so dominant. The work of Poe's imitators resembles the

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original little more than the writing of Avellaneda did that of Cervantes.

One of the most conspicuous characteristics of Poe's work is his ever present personality. In Greek mythology the earth, the air, the sea, each brook, rock, and grove was guarded by a spirit or a god. In Poe's writing Poe is the ubiquitous guardian. The subjectivity of his conceptions is constant. Every line is vibrant with his despair; he is the very essence of his characters.

The morbid school of writing in which Poe stands so prominent a figure is not a pleasing one. It probably had its inception in Germany. Goethe gave to the world "The Sorrows of Werther," Schiller,

“The Robbers,” and Kotzebue inoculated the public with the deadly germ in his many lugubrious dramas. The disease spread with great rapidity. From epidemic it has become endemic. In England, among others, it attacked Mrs. Radcliffe and Monk Lewis; in France, Eugene Sue and Victor Hugo; in America, Hawthorne. Brilliant in conception and artistic in treatment as many of these works are they are nevertheless often false in sentiment, and in spite of beauty somewhat pernicious in results. Many of these compositions are marked with a high order of genius and one cannot doubt that he is at Parnassus though not always in the pure atmosphere of its

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twin peaks, but frequently within its noxious cavern. I had rather spend a lifetime on the banks of the Wylie with Isaak Walton than pass a single night with Poe on the Phlegethon. There are, generally speaking, no elevating, happy thoughts, no lofty aims, no sweet, pure breaths from the outside world in this school. There is no harvest of beauty, love, or friendship to be garnered. In the world that Poe has created, tombs, sepulchres, ghoulishaunted woodlands, and Titanic alleys of cypress form the scenes, and spirits, demons, and vampires constitute the characters. Over those direful descriptions of lost souls and crawling, loathsome creatures, Poe

lingers with apparent delight. Putrescence is described at length in the story of "Arthur Gordon Pym"; Poe's gruesome imaginings hovering about like huge birds of carrion. It would seem sometimes as if "the insane root" had created for him those fearful sights. In the hands of a less gifted man these revolting descriptions would descend to the level of a cheap novel, genius alone saves them from that fate and renders them tolerable. One shudders at Poe's supernatural creations hanging in a haze of mystery and vagueness yet they are marked by a high poetical distinction, bewitching beauty and sublimity. Artistically the tone is perfection with him, and his words



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resound with a silvery echo, but when psychology forms the trend of thought the resonance is false and the discord apparent.

The shadow-edge of insanity hangs like a cloud over most of Poe's writing. No perfectly normal mind could conceive many of his "Tales" or certain of his poems. Emerson saw everywhere in nature the figure of a *disguised* man. One may discern in Poe's writing the figure of a *diseased* man. There is an atmosphere of sickness pervading almost every line. As the pearl is the result of a malady which superimposes a secretion of entrancing beauty, so "The Raven," "Ulalume," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "The Shadow" are

the superb yet distempered creations of a disordered and highly perturbed intellect.

There is no bottom to the depths of mystery and impenetrable gloom to which Poe's mind may carry us. When the ninth circle is reached, new gulfs are discovered leading still lower into Cimmerian darkness. His unique intellect recalls to mind those rare jewels whose brilliancy is enhanced amid dark surroundings; it has a phosphorescent quality, the full beauty of which cannot be seen but in the gloom of night. To Poe all persons and surroundings are in the sombreness of a total eclipse, an abnormal gloom at midday, yet we are conscious of a brilliant light

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beyond. It is not the darkness of night when the great luminary is gone, it is rather the light itself obscured. The world has cast a shadow upon the sun as the world cast a shadow upon his life.

In this country Poe's irregular habits of life, his eccentricities, and the enmities which he created often by ill-judged and unjust attacks, tended toward a sophistical yet widespread depreciation of his genius. Moreover, it should be remembered that when Poe gave his best thoughts to the public the cultivation of the people in America was not sufficiently developed to appreciate fully so artistic a work as his; work which required a marked degree of imagi-

nation and a delicate discriminating sense of tone. Poe cast a bomb, as it were, into the school of New England puritanism. With the exception of a comparatively small class of persons who saw with broader vision and felt with keener sensibility, his writing was not popular. The originality of his genius, however, was soon recognized in France and England, whose critics placed him first among the men of letters which America had produced. Poe's case is an anomalous instance of one of our writers receiving more homage and justice from across the Atlantic than he received at home. It is a balm to the wound inflicted by the scornful question put by

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Sydney Smith about that time—  
“Who reads an American book?”  
The scorn of it still rings in one’s ears,  
now dim, now loud, now receding,  
then returning like the strophe and  
antistrophe of Greek drama.

The criticism has been made that the genius of Poe is narrow. In the sense of comparison it is, for he did not possess the general range of certain eminent masters of English letters. The same criticism may be made of other great men. The “Elegy” of Gray, the “Abou Ben Adhem” of Hunt have kept their creators afloat on the turbulent and treacherous sea of literature and “The Raven,” if nothing else, will render Poe the same service. With Poe, the confined

limits of his scope carried with it all the potentiality of concentration. He gathered the radiations of his brilliant intellect to a focus until they burned with an enduring fire; and one recalls those saints which Dante says gained increased brightness by revolving on their own axes.

It is not the purpose or is it possible in so short a sketch to examine in detail the prose works of Poe, and I am content to speak of one or two that appeal strongly to me. Take the "Shadow" as an example. The display of strength, imagination, invention, the delicate transitions, and its ending with a note of supreme dignity and vigor combine in forming a masterpiece of forceful and artistic

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prose work. In its kind, and comprised as it is within the limits of three or four printed pages, one may well doubt if there is anything finer, more finished, or technically perfect in the whole range of English literature.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the description of Roderick Usher as he rises from the sofa to greet his friend is extraordinarily powerful. It is, indeed, a finished piece of prose, as clear-cut as a cameo on a dark ground. The entire story is a consummate work of artistic evolution. The description of the doomed house and its surroundings is masterly and partly prepares the reader for those astounding scenes which ultimately

follow, for as Poe finishes that woeful picture a feeling of intense depression, a foreboding and fear hang upon one as a pall. At this point of the story had Poe's singular powers been less marked, had his intellect strayed only an instant from its morbid course, had he allowed a ray of sunshine to penetrate the gloom of that abode, or permitted a scintilla of normal thought to enter the reader's mind, the effect would be utterly ruined. The whole artistic conception would irreparably fail in its object and the entire fabric collapse as completely as the "House" of which he writes. Throughout this story the genius of Poe is pre-eminently displayed. He begins in a key that few



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could sustain to the end with dignity. One is led step by step from one scene to another, each more weird, more harrowing, and yet more terrible than the last, until the climax overwhelms one with horror. In unity of design, literary craftsmanship, originality of thought and invention, "The Fall of the House of Usher" is second to none in English prose, and of tales of that character one would almost say that it stands alone.

Poe usually keeps one's mind harrowed by the mysterious, the weird, and the terrible. His words connote little that is pleasing and this accounts somewhat for the lack of recurring charm in his "Tales." It is generally reserved for

the works of genius that breathe simplicity of heart and love to forge a chain uniting the various stages of one's life. With the silent passing of time there comes a change, a mellowing, softening, imperceptible change to be sure, yet a certain one, like the growth of accretion, and man and all things ultimately fall under the gentle influence of the years. Many things interesting in youth become matters of indifference in maturer years. Time, the great iconoclast, overthrows one by one the idols worshiped in earlier days until at last, with the more unfortunate, few remain. If then one can read a book with the same feeling of inspiration and enjoy-

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ment when the sun sheds its oblique yet serene rays upon the page, that he felt in the warmer glow of noon, the work has stood one of the tests of immortality, for a man's life is the life of a nation in miniature.

Why does one return with increasing fondness and tender memories to the "Natural History of Selborne"? It is because the fresh, earnest, and simple style is always beckoning; because the restful, elusive touches of nature which Gilbert White, as the medium, brings to one in visible form and tangibility, are ever calling; because the sincerity of purpose, the inimitable sweetness of the man himself charms with a lasting power of attraction.

One turns to "The Compleat Angler" and to the "Vicar of Wakefield" for the same reasons; they also resemble the perennial plants blossoming throughout one's life. One reads and re-reads them as one would gather the blossoms, yet new buds are formed more vigorously by reason of the gathering. Each year finds the plants springing with renewed vigor from an unexhausted soil, bearing flowers even more beautiful and more perfumed than before. With this loving company Poe can never mingle. His works will survive, but it is his art and modelling alone, not the material or substance, that confers upon them imperishable life.

Probably the most unsatisfying

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part of Poe's "Tales" is the unrealness; the lifelessness of his characters. There is an undeniable artificialness about them. They but simulate real men and women, who feel and suffer, rejoice and grieve. These images that Poe has created resemble automaton groping in perpetual gloom. They appeal to one only as talking statues, although it must be admitted that, like Pygmalion, one is often entranced by the very coldness of their beauty.

Poe seldom exerts his talents to overwhelm the reader with purely physical terror. He has, indeed, attempted it in certain of his earlier tales, but it was soon abandoned. One is carried almost uniformly by

an actual *tour de force* to a *dénouement* of intellectual horror by means of the strange and weird power of his mind. This controlling desire amounts almost to an obsession with Poe and one must acknowledge that the singleness of purpose to achieve that end is an evidence of the limitation of his genius. There are times when his object is poorly veiled and the effect of the *dénouement* is defeated in consequence: one does not fear the lion after seeing his chains. Under the idiosyncratic working of Poe's mind everything becomes vague, visionary, and grotesque. He appears as one of those deluded followers of Heraclitus who sees in the real

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nothing but shadows; nothing exists, except in a continuous passage between existence and non-existence. Yet in Poe's distinguished work his art is so discriminating and refined; his powers of invention so pronounced that he occasionally dulls the faculties of perception and one fails to detect at the time the *bizarre* and unreal in his conceptions. The appropriateness of the accessories and the uniform perfection of detail in the environment all lend to the unreal the similitude of real. It may be said of Poe:

"His intellect so bright, that it could shed  
A lustre o'er the darkest deeds of crime;  
So dazzling bright that it at once could dim  
The sight of mortals, and from human gaze  
Enshroud the misery itself produced."

One's mind easily becomes accustomed to the intense weirdness of Poe's conceptions, nay, not only accustomed to them, it is powerfully dominated by them. The spell of his genius is irresistible and one abandons oneself to its sway. It is only when one has broken the chains of bondage and escaped from the potency of Poe's spell that a calm contemplation often reveals the object of his art and the distortion of his thoughts. Many of the "Tales" pay a penalty for this cunning artifice, for having once regained one's good sense he is seldom enthralled again. I may be wrong, but I doubt if any one of the "Tales" is re-read by many people, and if



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it is there surely lingers little of the illusion experienced in the first reading. It is the powerful magnetic emanation from Poe's prose tales—the most indifferent reader must feel it—probably more than any other quality that raises him above Monk Lewis and Mrs. Radcliffe, and makes him superior to Maturin or the author of "Otranto."

After all it is but weak criticism which denies merit because there is not perfection. Walter Pater's opinion of the genius of Thackeray was almost contemptuous, chiefly because the novelist was not versed in the Greek language. Thackeray's fame will not suffer on account of that criticism. Comparing the work

of the great novelist with that of the scholarly and polished stylist, there can exist little doubt in one's mind which posterity will know and cherish. "Henry Esmond" will be read when "Marius the Epicurean" is as dead as the characters that Pater has there so carefully and dexterously drawn.

Notwithstanding the widespread disparagement of Poe's genius, certain of his productions are of the number that will live and thrive like the camomile plant of Falstaff—the more it is trodden on the more it grows. Poe's extraordinary intellectual powers, his supreme art and craftsmanship possess in too marked a degree the essential elements of vitality to prove ephemeral. He will

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not be doomed to that overcrowded *limbo* which the Kôran describes as being reserved for mediocrity. Thoreau feared to be like one who foolishly drives a nail into lath and plaster. It may be early to speak of an established literature on this side of the Atlantic, yet one feels that it will be found that Poe has driven his nail firmly in the supporting timbers of the structure when finally a noble edifice is completed in honor of American letters.

It is not within the scope of this sketch to compare the merit of Poe's work with that of certain other men writing in the same morbid school, yet I cannot refrain from mentioning a certain superiority which, to my

mind, Poe's best productions display over theirs. I have not been able to find, for example, in the tales of Hoffmann or in the stories of Baudelaire anything comparable to the "Shadow" or "The House of Usher," and I have searched in vain in the stanzas of Verlaine and Blake for the invention, artistic finish, and tone which so distinguish "The Haunted Palace," "To Zante," "Israel," and "To One in Paradise."

Over Poe's critical work, I shall not linger. In that department of literature he now holds no enduring place. His literary ability, his advancing fame, and forceful mind combined to make his criticisms a power at that time. He is usually

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logical and convincing, yet an absence of keen critical acumen is occasionally noticeable in his work and his criticisms are often marred by suspicion and bad temper. He frequently pruned without discrimination, not knowing upon what branches the flower bud formed he cut away the new growth as well as the old wood, and many buds perished which might have blossomed. His criticisms often wounded others and frequently hurt himself. When one recalls his unjust attack on gentle Longfellow, one feels that his boomerang missed its mark but, returning, injured him. Notwithstanding all these defects in his critical work he undoubtedly did good at the period in which he

wrote and aided to no small extent the literature of his time.

To those tales of ratiocination including, among others, "The Gold Bug," "The Purloined Letter," "The Mystery of Marie Roget," Poe brought to bear an analytical mind eminently adapted. Other men have, since Poe's death, developed this kind of stories at greater length, and possibly gained a wider field of popularity, but none has the original inventive power quite so well defined as he.

It is hard rightly to judge a great man or his work during his life. In effect it is not unlike holding an object too near the eye, whereby all relative size and proportion is destroyed. Some one has made a

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ming simile which compares life winding and ascending road, the contour of which cannot be seen till the summit has been reached; and for the first time the whole scene spreads beneath the eye and may be judged in its true perspective. Nearly two generations have passed since the untimely and tragic ending of Poe's life in the hospital at Baltimore. Sufficient time has elapsed for the exaggerations concerning his habits and weaknesses to assume more normal proportions and as the years pass a more discriminating judgment will be passed upon Poe and upon his work. The chasm which now separates his admirers from his detractors will in

time be bridged. The chauvinism of the former will be modified, the prejudices of the latter softened, and our descendants will see the day when those opposing factions meet midway upon this bridge with outstretched hands. At present the time is not yet ripe and although the bridge is gradually building it is still almost as difficult to cross as *al Sirât*.

"The jury," says Shelley, "which sits in judgment upon a poet must be composed of his peers; it must be empanelled by time from the selectest of the wise of many generations." Posterity is, indeed, the great arbitrator. Bound by no law, unbiassed and fearless, there is no appeal from



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judgments; they are immutable. In it, man and his work receive ailing justice. A period of time which the Platonic year is as a grain of sand in the hour-glass, will not diminish the luster of Bacon's genius, nor make of it other than one of the most distinguished that the world has given us, or will an equal length of time sweeten Bacon's memory; his reputation will remain forever one of the most unenviable that history records. To this court of time we resort we resign Poe's character with a feeling of hope; to this high tribunal we may entrust Poe's genius with a feeling of tranquillity.

## CHAPTER III

When you see a man in distress,  
Know him for a fellow-man.

SENECA.

ONE speaks of Poe's character with reluctance; one stands upon quicksand. In a letter to James Russell Lowell, of July, 1844, Poe writes: "You speak of an estimate of my life—and from what I have already said you will see that I have none to give. I have been too deeply conscious of the mutability and evanescence of temporal things to give any continuous effort to any-

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thing. My life has been whim—impulse—passion—a longing for solitude—a scorn for all things present in an earnest desire for the future.” What a summing up at the age of thirty-five! With so dismal a foreword the prospect is, to say the least, not encouraging.

Poe was so unsatisfactory, his life’s history formed so tangled a network of contradictions, that it seems impossible to unravel it. Hardly a single cord can be loosened and followed without rendering the entire mass more confused. The events of his life bring to mind those Æschylean tragedies in which man is subordinated to a supreme conflict; and his actions, while apparently voluntary,

are nevertheless but the exponents of powerful opposing agents swaying him to an irresistible and predestined course. Poe appears as if struggling in some terrific maelstrom (such as he himself has so vividly described), that whirls him onward with ever-increasing rapidity and superhuman power to his doom. It was one of the more reasonable beliefs of the followers of Pythagorean philosophy that in order thoroughly to understand a man another must be found with identical traits of character to explain his prototype. If there be any logic in that thought, it is not hard to realize why Poe was misunderstood; for he was unique, and no one could

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sound the depths of that strange, mysterious, and complex nature. Neither Virginia nor Mrs. Clemm understood him, nor did they try to find a solution. They were conscious of but one emotion—they loved him—and the magic of that spell left all else unsought and undesired. Unreserved sympathy may not be granted to Poe at all times, for there are many instances when sympathy cannot conscientiously be given, yet the great sorrows and trials of his life, must surely enlist sincere pity.

Comparing Poe with other distinguished men of American letters who have gone to the great Beyond, the retrospection reveals many whose

traits of character we more admire; many whose genius has left with us memories more cherished and enduring; we find none whose life's history so quickly suffuses the eye with a mist of sorrow and regret as that of Poe. ' The only explanation one can make of his erratic career, if indeed it be an explanation, may be found in his strange and hyper-sensitive temperament coupled with the unfortunate circumstances of his early life and adolescence. When an infant, he was left an orphan, and taken in charge by strangers. His boyhood was nomadic and dependent. In his seventh year he was placed under the care of a school-master in a foreign land,

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where for five years he was estranged from his friends and guardians. That was the crucial period when his strange nature should have been carefully moulded into form with a father's firm, but sympathetic hand, and his thoughts guided by a mother's gentle and loving influence.

In justice to Poe one should search for such causes as he can find to account for those lamentable traits and unsteady habits which so blasted his life and clouded his memory. To do this the retrospection must be directed to that period of plasticity when Poe's character was formed in a great measure by others; when extraneous influences may have

diverted the normal current of his thoughts and dwarfed his more noble aspirations; when uncongeniality may have fostered an innate morbid tendency and engendered bitterness and despair. One has only to point to Poe's meeting with Mrs. Stannard to prove that he was unhappy in his home-life, that his sensitive nature longed for love and tenderness. A few words of friendly interest and sympathy expressed by that gracious lady so overcame the lad that he stood speechless with gratitude: a gratitude that endured throughout his life. The sad destiny that ever befell Poe in other matters overtook him in this instance, for death deprived him of



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this friend at a time in his life when he urgently needed her.

. . . . "Other friends have flown before;  
On the morrow he will leave me, as my  
Hopes have flown before."

Still pursuing the search I learn from letters and other sources that the character of Mr. Allan was honorable, possessing a strict sense of justice, and with a willingness always to befriend his foster-son in every way where his *purse* could avail. I do not wish to appear unjust, neither do I forget Poe's frequent and serious acts of insubordination, nor yet am I unmindful of the many chances given him to reform—chances which he failed to

embrace. Still I notice a distinct tendency in Mr. Allan to narrow-mindedness, a lack of sympathetic consideration, and a want of loving expostulation; in short an utter lack of capacity to comprehend or ability to cope with so difficult a problem as the proper moulding of a character like Poe's. The indefinable influence of a father's love, the ineffable sweetness of a tie of consanguinity, the solicitude of a parent's watchful, patient, and indulgent care, Poe never had. How much the possession of these signal advantages would have affected his mature career, can be, at best, but a matter of speculation,—it might not have changed him in the least,

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it might have changed him entirely. Who can say? Poe is at least entitled to the thought. At the age of seventeen he entered a university not distinguished for discipline or high moral influences. Then followed his enlistment in the army and finally a cadetship at West Point. It would be hard to imagine a worse combination for one with Poe's weaknesses; it would be impossible to conceive of a better one to develop those vices to which he was prone.

To this point in his career nothing had occurred, however, which a later life of temperance would not have fully effaced. His mode of living did not materially differ from that of many other youths who afterward

filled respectable and useful places in society. The world looks with leniency on the escapades of the boy; it regards with severity the vices of the man. The record of Poe's boyhood shows him of normal physical development, excelling in athletic and outdoor sports. That he inherited serious constitutional weaknesses from both of his parents cannot be doubted, still with proper care and normal living it is not unreasonable to suppose that a youth so promising might have ultimately developed into a manhood of health if not of vigor. His excesses and an exhausting intellectual vocation, however, had so sapped his vital forces that the germ of disease was well de-

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veloped before he reached the age of twenty-five. In the summer of 1835, his letters speak of ill-health, and these complaints become more frequent as the months pass. Poe's life started a bud only to end a thorn. It was supposed at one time that the hardships of Poe's wanderings had undermined his health, but his story of a visit to foreign lands, imprisonment in Russia, and life on board a whaler existed but in his fertile imagination. The only wholly unrecorded time he had for such adventures occurred during that period which separates his quixotic departure from the Allan home in January, 1827, from the date of his enlistment at Boston in May

of the same year; a length of time obviously inadequate to encompass these extraordinary experiences.

With the opening of the year 1836, Poe's prospects were the brightest since his early boyhood. That was the time in his life of all others to abandon the tortuous road in which he wandered, to turn toward a purer life with its ultimate goal of happiness. He had recently married the girl of his choice, secured the friendship and patronage of that true gentleman, John S. Kennedy, and was in a steady and fairly lucrative position as co-editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Apart from these welcome fortunes, his literary fame was advancing and he had

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ned the friendly wishes of Beverly  
aker and John K. Paulding. Poe  
ht then have proceeded anywhere  
h confidence, for with the good-  
and interest of these prominent  
n he carried with him "*letters of*  
*hesus*," insuring success in all  
tures. Looking at his subsequent  
duct one can but in charity  
sider it the result of an insidious  
ease of the mind. No man in  
session of his faculties or the least  
control of his actions, especially  
er having experienced the distress  
poverty and the degradation of  
nk, would have voluntarily cast  
de these newly found fortunes to  
ume the wretchedness and despair  
an existence from which he had

so recently extricated himself. He crossed the "irremeable stream," and there was no returning.

Certain critics have stated in substance that Poe was an intellectual anomaly, possessed of a head but no heart. They have said that he had loves and affections but no moral heart; in short no conscience, and consequently incapable of any feeling of remorse. While no one can consistently make the assertion that Poe was an Epictetian in any sense, still that charge is, probably unjust. Poe's whole life, every action, proclaims his ~~hyper-sensitive nature,~~ and such a nature ever bears with it a capacity for suffering; ever keenly responds to the pangs of conscience.



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great intellectual gifts," says Schopenhauer in "The Wisdom of Life," mean an activity pre-eminently nervous in its character, and consequently a very high degree of susceptibility to pain in every form." It is unjust to denounce those faults which arose chiefly from Poe's intensely sensitive organization and to deprive him of the extenuations which ought to be considered in judging such a temperament. To admit that Poe fell into certain faults on account of his nervous organization and then to state that he felt no real regret for having contracted them is in effect to give him two distinct natures: one delicate, susceptible, highly strung; the

other phlegmatic, cold, and lethargic. Poe's words ring true when he describes his remorse and in justice to him one ought to accept them as sincere when they are compatible with his nature.

Many of Poe's letters to his mother-in-law are simple, natural, and show the most attractive side of this singular man's character. It is gratifying to read them for that reason, but they are usually short, as if Poe feared giving too much time to pleasant and normal matters. An occasional flash of light also penetrates his works, but it is not the light of sunshine carrying with it a glow of warmth and health; it resembles more the bolt of lightning

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n dark and storm-tossed clouds  
only serves to reveal vividly  
gloom whence it generated.  
He said that Byron was a self-  
mentor and terrible subjects were  
his darling theme—that in all his  
works hardly one of them had a  
powerful subject. How true this is  
of Poe. Just how much of Poe's  
melancholy temperament was con-  
genital, just how much was genera-  
ted by the uncongeniality of his  
childhoodful environment, how much  
came from his sorrows and mis-  
fortunes, and how much was the  
result of his continual dissipation is,  
of course, impossible to say. That  
was not assumed one knows, for  
the current of his despondency ran

too deeply and steadily through an unhappy life to be the result of affectation. Byron's misfortunes and his subsequent erratic and sensual life gained for him a general popularity. In England the young men wore their collars in the fashion he had set; affected a melancholy air, while others even went as far in their ridiculous adoration as to walk with a limp. In France, the sufferings of Rousseau and the record of a disgusting life were pitied by thousands. No one imitated, few pitied, Poe. The little cottage at Fordham, barren of the actual necessities of life, threw no such glamour about it as the Guiccioli palace at Ravenna or the Hermitage of Montmorency. Poe's

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her sufferings and trials received neither commiseration nor even justice from the world nor gained him widespread popularity. On the contrary, in many instances his faults were cruelly exaggerated and his weaknesses held in contempt by his contemporaries. Griswold, in particular, did a great deal of harm by disseminating many false statements concerning Poe and probably, more than any other man, is responsible for the obloquy associated with his memory. Seneca has a counsel which Griswold might have followed: *nemcunque miserum videris, hominem scias.*"

Let us remember that Poe made sincere efforts to overcome the vice

of alcoholism. He took liquor as nepenthe, not so much, we may believe, to exhilarate, for his melancholy was too aggravated to be leavened, as impelled by an ungovernable desire for oblivion; to leave for the moment the misery of his existence and the consciousness of his despair. "I had long intervals of horrible sanity," he wrote to a friend. He paid a terrible price for the short periods of forgetfulness that he sought. The reaction was pitiful and he emerged from those spells racked with pain and more miserable than before both in body and in mind. Who can refrain from pity for this man? He had a mania for that which gave him no pleasure

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and served only to augment his misery. He was like a victim of hydrophobia whom the sight of water convulses though perishing from thirst. With most men intoxicants are either an aid to sociability or the gratification of an abnormal appetite. With Poe it was neither; it was a mania. His delicate sensibility could not withstand the gradual and pleasurable effects of alcohol. What would hardly cause exhilaration in a normal organization made *him* mad. A single glass reduced him to almost absolute intoxication. With the first indulgence his reason fled and his faculties became excited to the verge of frenzy. What to Poe's companions

was a social gathering was to Poe an alcoholic debauch; what to them was recreation was to him disgrace. That his frequent and utter intoxication and its subsequent effects diminished in a degree the *quantity* of his intellectual productions it would be idle to deny; that it impaired the *quality* or lessened the exquisite force of his mind, until toward the close of his life, is not so certain.

Reviewing Poe's life one is impressed by certain traits of character as well as events that recall the career of Coleridge. The restless disposition, the periods of depression, are strikingly similar. Poe's enlistment in Boston reminds one



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of "Comberback's," in London. Above the vision palace of "Kubla Khan" rises the awful Spectre of Opium; in many of Poe's weird creations one sees the Demon of Alcohol.

## CHAPTER IV

There was a poet whose untimely tomb  
No human hands with pious reverence  
    reared,  
But the charmed eddies of autumnal winds  
Built o'er his mouldering bones a pyramid  
Of mouldering leaves in the waste Wilder-  
    ness.

SHELLEY.

POE was the quintessence of every-  
    thing inconsistent, irrational,  
and fickle. Any attempt to give  
a logical analysis of his character  
will prove utterly futile; it is wiser  
not to make the effort. Who can  
reconcile his sitting half-frozen at  
the newly made grave of his girl-

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wife, with his partly crazy, partly maudlin protestations of love to several women about the same time? Who can recall without a sigh the times of gentleness and love; who can remember without distress those periods of madness and intoxication? One hears of him planting flowers and tending them with the tenderness of a Richter; then imprisoning a bird and watching its distress with almost the cruelty of a Robespierre; now speaking with ineffable tenderness of the odor of orris associated in his memory with his foster-mother in years gone by, then proposing marriage to a plain widow with the sole purpose of securing the benefits of her wealth. One's sympathy goes out to

him at Fordham; one's indignation overtakes him at Richmond.

To some people the name of Poe but recalls a man who created poems so involved in mystery and engulfed in despairing and unutterable gloom as to be unreadable; the writer of tales so inexpressibly horrible as to be unfit for cultivated minds. To these people Lowell's couplet:

"There comes Poe with his raven, like  
Barnaby Rudge,  
Three fifths of him genius and two fifths  
sheer fudge,"

seems perfectly natural and just; they probably consider, however, that Lowell has been too generous with his fractional division.

An account of Poe's silly relations











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with women is in charity omitted. His behavior resembles too closely that of a modern Werther to excite compassion, and only shows the inane side of a character already overwhelmed with weaknesses. It may be said in palliation of this frailty and not as an excuse for it that Poe was extremely sensitive to feminine praise and sympathy and found it with very little effort or search. Still, with all Poe's faults and with all his weaknesses, at the recollection of those blighting years at Fordham, those pathetic scenes of poverty, despair, and death, my emotions surge with irresistible strength and my heart throbs with unutterable sorrow for that forlorn,

and wretched man. Picture the poor though cleanly room: a bed of straw, but no covering, upon which lies a worn and dying wife deprived of the very necessities of life. Young, refined, and loving, she awaits death with equanimity, distressed only by the anxiety of her husband and her mother. Picture the scene: the bitter cold of a northern winter, the coat of the husband serving as a blanket for his dying wife, and the cat, with seemingly an intuition, lying upon the sufferer's breast, giving such heat as it can to comfort an ebbing human life—a beast bestowing that which man had refused. Less torments than these have unbalanced normal minds, what an effect they

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must have had on Poe with a mind already deranged. A grinding poverty accompanied Poe with relentless steps throughout his life. It was not merely the poverty of inconvenience, it was a despairing poverty, a desperate and hungry poverty, like that of Otway or Chatterton, which looked with straining eyes for food. The shadows of the Eumenides continuously fell across Poe's path expelling the sunlight from his life. If it be true, as Rénan says, that pain creates mind, Poe has proved his title to genius.

"The road to excess," William Blake once observed, "leads to the palace of Wisdom," but if "wisdom" here means the breaking away

from excess it was not true in Poe's life, for his weaknesses and excesses inveterated. From the close of the year 1847 until his tragic end, what a lamentable sight this man presents. A canker seemed at work consuming the flower of his splendid intellect. With mind tottering, no longer in the least in command of his actions, he resembled the derelict of a fine vessel—rudder gone, superstructure reduced to wreckage, aimlessly tossed about by an inexorable fate, he became a burden to himself as well as the despair of those who still refrained from abandonment. Taking his eventful, wretched, and eccentric existence, from early boyhood until middle life, it has no parallel

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in the history of eminent literary men of modern times except that of Otway and Savage.

No one may say of Poe what Burke said of Fox, that he was born to be loved,—yet there are glimpses of his character which ought to endear him to us. A search throughout Poe's life for any strong ties of friendship will be in vain. There exist none of those loving bonds; none of the many little acts of mutual affection and self-sacrifice which cement so firmly the friendships of men, examples of which are so conspicuous in the life of Lamb and that of Newman. In a recent critical essay, Professor Winchester said of DeQuincey that "he was born with

eyes that open inwards, he lived in a world of his own—a world of dream and speculation.” This description is peculiarly applicable to Poe. Poe was in no sense of a sociable or affectionate nature. In congenial company he could at times be pleasant, even cheerful, always refined, and of dignified and gentle bearing. His manners were urbane and polished. The love he bore his girl-wife was touching and sincere; his reverence for her memory, tender though evanescent; and his mother-in-law regarded him as a loving son. Many of his contemporaries bear testimony to his personal attractions. His voice was low, clear, finely modulated, and

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with that persuasive power usually so attractive to the gentler sex. His figure was slight, elegant, and of excellent proportions; his eyes large, luminous, and glowing with keen intelligence; his brow high and broad, unmistakably denoting a marked intellectuality. Of his personal magnetism there exists no doubt; as I said before he was especially attractive to women, a fact that an admirer of Poe can only regret.

Mr. Kennedy adds his tribute to Poe's memory by saying: "He always remembered my kindness with gratitude, as his many letters to me testify." Both Mr. Graham and Mr. Willis vouch for his gentle and unobtrusive manner, his industry and

his high sense of honor in his transactions. When he was composing "Eureka" writes Mrs. Clemm, "we used to walk up and down the garden, his arm around me, mine around him. At home he was simple and affectionate as a child and during all the years he lived with me I do not remember a single night that he failed to come and kiss his 'mother,' as he called me, before going to bed." "I have never seen him," says Mrs. Osgood, "otherwise than gentle, generous, well-bred, and fastidiously refined."

Reading the memoir of Poe written by Griswold shortly after the poet's death one is impressed by certain statements which seem to bear a



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positive vindictiveness toward Poe. His remark, that Poe was awarded the \$100 prize for the story of the "MS. found in a Bottle" solely because it had been unanimously decided by the committee to give it to the "first genius who had written legibly," has been proved false by John H. B. Latrobe, who served on the committee above mentioned. I cite this instance because its very triviality causes it to be more marked in showing an undignified, and prejudiced animus. It is not my purpose to enter into the details of Griswold's cruel and unsympathetic criticism of Poe's character. The word "Memoir" attached to that writing appears as an ironical mis-

nomer and the substitution of "Arraignment" would seem more fitting. I shall dismiss the Griswold "Memoir" after speaking of one or two flagrant instances of unjust and biased statements. In describing the final meeting of Poe with Mrs. Whitman, Griswold makes the assertion that the poet committed "such outrages as made necessary the summons of the police." This cruel statement was denied by William J. Babodie, who brought incontrovertible proofs of its falsity. And finally I know of no greater rebuke to Griswold than that of a dying lady (Mrs. Osgood), prompted by a sense of justice and humanity, employing the last hours granted to

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her in vindicating by a tender message the character of him who had already passed that bourne which she was soon to cross. The solemnity of such a refutation none can deny, it is sanctified by death and sealed by truth. By that beautiful and self-sacrificing effort Griswold stands convicted, and Mrs. Osgood has placed him in the awful position of that unscrupulous man who doomed his friend Essex to the headsman.

Following the footsteps of this unfortunate man, these glimpses of the better side of his character are the oases islanded on a great desert of despair and gloom, and one's eyes, like those of the weary traveller,

rest upon them with delight. They are the soothing and refreshing places where one may linger in enjoyment and repose, ere renewing the journey over the burning wastes of a desolate life.

The devotion of Mrs. Clemm to Poe and the lovability of her character formed the sweetest strain, if not the only melody, heard amidst the discord of Poe's existence. In her sweet, pure life the alembic of sorrow is manifest. The story of that poor and insufficiently clad old woman wandering from one publisher to another, offering here for sale a poem, there some literary work, pleading for her son and begging for him alone none can read

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without emotion. Her boy was ill, that was all she had to tell. It is seldom granted to man to possess so unwavering a love, loyalty, and tenderness as Poe received from her. Her presence carried with it the immortal glow of transcendent love. No reverses, no broken promises, no distress of poverty, not even the humiliation reflected from Poe's intoxication, ever for an instant checked the flow of that unalterable current of affection, or quenched one spark of that vestal fire of love. It would be unjust to say that Poe did not appreciate her, and so far as his strange nature permitted, love and reverence her. That *she* was satisfied is shown in the last letter

sent to Willis, in which she wrote: "Say what an affectionate son he was to me, his poor desolate mother." A world of womanly love is centred in those words. The man's failings, the writer's genius, the obloquy of an ignoble death are all forgotten, but the memory of the boy and the recollection of his affection, rise insuperable and strong, and on this shrine she placed an undiminished love. Had the world seen Poe through her loving eyes his grave had not remained untouched and forsaken during a quarter of a century.

Such then in outline are the weaknesses and such the unusual talents of this man. That his suffering

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was due in a great measure to his weaknesses we must all admit, nevertheless it is ungrateful of us who accept so much from his genius, to place a magnifying lens on his private life and habits and thereby dwarf all else. Shall we allow that monster of evil, which tortured Poe throughout his life like some hideous Frankenstein, still to haunt his memory? Shall we only turn our eyes downward to gloom and darkness (as Aristophanes pictures the pupils of Socrates) when there is so much of beauty and light above? Let us rather seek Eunoë, that beneficent stream a draught of whose sweet waters leaves with us only the memory of good.

Let us recall Poe's remarkable mind, his brilliant genius, and with softened heart be lenient toward his faults. And let us also emulate as nearly as man can, the divine tenderness of the best of Men, when He said, let him who is without sin cast the first stone.

The beautiful thought expressed by Heine of Meyerbeer applies to Poe, and it is perhaps not unfitting to repeat it here: "By his works he has won, never again to lose, his citizenship in the Eternal city of fine minds; in the Jerusalem of Celestial art."

On Poe's cenotaph let us not speak of his life, neither praise his virtues nor write a lengthy epitaph. Let



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us carve alone that beautiful and simple word which the Greeks revered — Χαῖρε — so full of sorrow and so full of love.













